

## **Talking To Your Child About Adoption** **By Jennifer Winkelmann, MA, LPC, NCC**

Many parents struggle with how and when to talk to their children about being adopted. My experience with adoptive parents is that the topic often brings up feelings of anxiety. Parents wonder, “What will I say? What *should* I say? And what if my child asks questions that I can’t answer?” They worry that the adoption story, and all of the circumstances around it, will be too much for their child to handle emotionally. Many adoptive parents struggle with what information is appropriate to share, and at what age.

Because talking to your child about her/his adoption is an important part of their development, I’m suggesting some basic guidelines:

- 1. Start talking about adoption as early as possible.** It is helpful for parents to begin talking about adoption right away, even while the child is still young and before expressive language is developed (this can even happen in infancy). These early one-sided discussions give parents the opportunity to practice having these words in their mouths before they are telling the story “for real” in conversation with their child(ren). For example, as you’re holding your son or daughter, whisper, “I know you must be so confused, little one, because joining our family isn’t something you can make sense of right now. You must have been so afraid the day that your birth mom left you, and I wonder if you worry the same thing may happen with me. But I won’t leave you! We adopted you, and that means you’ll be in our family forever!” Your little one will get a lot out of what you say about their adoption, even before they’re able to understand the language you use (remember, the majority of communication is non-verbal). A bonus to early practice with the story is that parents are better equipped for two-way conversations with their child about their early history and adoption. As opportunities to talk about adoption arise, even with a baby, take advantage of these times to “practice” sharing what you know about your child’s story with him/her.
- 2. Be open and always tell the truth.** While many children are too young at the time of adoption to consciously remember their histories in China, we need to understand that he/she still lived all of their experiences (and they are stored at a deeper level of memory). Your children know, embedded deep in their systems, the truth about their lives. So whatever you know, share it with sensitivity, choosing your words to match your child’s developmental age. Don’t try to shelter or hide your child from the truth of his/her experience; parents who take this approach often find that, down the road, their child feels “lied to.” The rifts that may result carry far greater risk for psychological injury than the truth of his/ her history. The key to talking about a difficult past is being prepared to support your child through any tough feelings that may show up.

Dr. Dan Hughes describes it this way: “We do not facilitate safety when we support a child’s avoidance of the pain, but rather when we remain emotionally present when he is addressing and experiencing the pain.” Being open and truthful about your child’s history is one of the best ways to help them heal, even if the information has the potential to be distressing.

Also, be aware that if you withhold information about your child’s story, he/she may get the non-verbal message that there is something about which he/she should be ashamed. Many

adopted children wrestle with intrinsic feelings of shame anyway, so it is important to be very aware of and intentional about acceptance. At the core of their being, particularly when they are very young and just beginning to make sense of their adoption, many children believe that their separation from their birth parents was their “fault.” They are too ego-centric to consider all of the other factors that may have gone into this early loss. It’s essential, therefore, when discussing the adoption story, to be sure that we demonstrate acceptance and openness to combat potential feelings of shame.

- 3. Be aware of the trickle-down effect.** Many parents are intimidated by conversations about their child’s early history because the topic is also emotionally loaded for them. Moms and Dads have shared their underlying feelings of sadness and helplessness about what their child may have experienced before “coming home.” So, if you experience stress as you imagine talking with your daughter or son about their adoption, know that those feelings will come through in your communication. If you are aware of how you feel and work through it, you are less likely to impose *your* feelings on your child.

Adopted children have a range of reactions to their adoption story; it’s important that children have authentic reactionary experiences about their adoption story so that we are able to take cues about where they may need additional emotional support. The range of reactions can be from a matter-of-fact perspective, to a mild curiosity about their life in China, to desperate feelings to know his or her birth parents combined with feelings of confusion, sadness, and shame. Those children whose story has been a part of their life all along (i.e. parents talk about adoption from the very beginning) tend to fare better than those whose parents sit them down for “the talk.” It is important that you are emotionally available to your child when discussing the story. If you are consumed with your own feelings of anxiety, you may miss some of the cues your child sends about what your child needs from you as he/she integrates and heals from these experiences.

- 4. Don’t make them choose.** It can be scary for many adoptive parents to feel like their child has an interest in his/her birth parents. Some children have no conscious memory of their birth parents but express feelings of missing them, or loving them. This can be threatening to many forever parents (after all, sometimes part of the draw to international adoption is to avoid the legal risk associated with birth parents, right?). It’s important, however, to allow your child to express and explore any feelings that they may have about their birth parents. If your child experiences an openness and acceptance from you on the topic, he/she will be better able to process all of this information and it will build your relationship. Just as there is enough love in you for all of your children and those that may still join your family, there is enough love in the heart of your child to have love for the parents who gave life and the parents who give him/her a forever family.
- 5. Find a “Sounding Board.”** If you are nervous about how to approach these sensitive issues with your child, if you need to brainstorm, or if you need some support as you work through your own feelings associated with your child’s history, call the Red Thread Counseling Center for a consultation. Tap into other resources as well – talk to other adoptive parents, take advantage of mentoring programs, and speak candidly with your social worker. You don’t have to be alone in this challenging season of parenthood. Give yourself the gift of consulting with someone who understands the heart of adoption issues. As your

fears are eased, you're in a better position to provide your daughters and sons with the support they need.